

The Christmas Tree Decoration Mystery

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I love mysteries. To my delight I found two good ones at Crestwood which have been quite fun to unravel this week. They are not earth-shattering mysteries, but they have to do with the ornaments hanging on our tree in the sanctuary.

Sitting in a pew near the front, I first became intrigued. Perhaps I should have been paying more attention to the service, but my eyes traveled over the tree and I went closer when the service was over. The big white and yellow ornaments hanging on the bows are decorated Christian symbols, made with a felt-type material, and I guessed, homemade. Little tags hung from some of them. Where did they come from, I wondered.

Figuring these had the look of an older time, I went straight to our former Rev. Bill McDonald who said they were there before his tenure. He said they are called Chrismons and he gave me a link to read about them. I then turned to the even earlier tenured Rev. David Blondell who has an extraordinary memory about Crestwood. However, he didn't remember anything about them either. A mundane question became a mystery.



Before we continue, perhaps I should discuss Chrismons. The name comes from a combination of the words "Christ Monograms." According to Google they are the brain-child of a woman named Francis Kipps Spencer from the Ascension Lutheran Church in Danville, Virginia. The decorations began in 1957 with the Chi Rho figure, which is the outline of two Greek letters that translate to "Christ." The Chrismon symbols expanded to include any shape that refers primarily to Christ and God. They are traditionally white or gold (or both) which are the liturgical colors of the Christmas season. But I digress. Back to the mystery.

I talked to a number of people, and even to my son who remembered large white ornaments on the tree when he was a child in the 80s. I thought I was on the right track and futilely turned my questions to some older members of our congregation. Then I found Roberta Buckley.

Roberta admitted to being the instigator of this lasting project and, later, others chimed in to praise her involvement. At the time during the period of interest, Judy Cowgill donated a book about Chrismons which included patterns to make them. Roberta put together packets of felt, gold beads, braid, and pearls and put them with instructions in ziplock bags. The bags were distributed to women in the church interested in participating. There is some thought the volunteer seamstresses might have come from the women's circles, but no one is sure after all these years. Many of the ornaments have little tags on them, hidden within the greenery, telling the meaning of the symbol.

Then, just as I thought the mystery was solved, Fran Allen mentioned these Chrismons were these *second* set of ornaments. And, indeed, I noticed, there were a number of normal-sized, beautifully cross-stitched, ornaments on our tree. The search was on again.

In earlier years, it seems there was a tree, smaller then, placed behind the choir (which sat in a different location than today). Judy Cowgill said she cross-stitched ornaments for that tree in 1986 as she drove out West with her family. I can't imagine doing that delicate work in a moving car! Her skillful efforts now hang on our bigger tree.

But another past Crestwood project then raised its head. Fran McKinney, Crestwood historian, said that her daughter Sydney's Sunday School class made some star-shaped foam ornaments for the tree when Pat Nielsen was her teacher. I have not been able to get hold of Pat, but I turned to my son once again and sent him some pictures. The Chrismons today are not what he remembered – his childhood memory is of some foam-like material, but they were large and white- just like Sydney described. It was another verification that Pat's class must have decorated the old tree for the church.

So, that was settled. The Chrismons we enjoy today are at least the third set of handmade ornaments adorning Crestwood trees. First, there were large foam ornaments from youngsters for the smaller tree in the earlier 80s. Then came the cross-stitched ornaments which traveled cross country in the making and moved from the smaller tree to the larger one in '86. And then the larger Crismon ornaments appeared, thanks to many handy seamstresses. They remain today for our inspiration. I'm sure there were

ornaments in the earlier years of the church, but the memories of them are probably lost to time.

But I wasn't done! There was another mystery which emerged that I still have not unwoven. It's the most fun of all. In the back of the tree, hidden from the congregation, there is a large UK ornament, made of the same material and design-style as the Chrismons elsewhere. It is white with gold shiny spangles with enough blue spangles to accent the University of Kentucky emblem. It was obviously made by someone with seamstress skills.

I first asked Rev. Wilcoxson about its origin. "I don't know," he laughed, "but I love it." I then went to Rev. McDonald who admitted it was there during his time, but with a twinkle in his eye said he didn't know where it came from or when. "Maybe some choir member with a sense of humor," he replied. Rev. Blondell denied knowledge of its origin.

My notes got impossibly confusing once I started talking to women who were in the church during the possible years. There were all kinds of good-natured finger pointings and I now have a list of those who were good seamstresses and who had wicked senses of humor. It's all too convoluted to unwind here. Some people now deceased even were listed as possibilities. As a side, I interestingly learned that the choir is often up to wild jokes and nonsense. That would make a Spotlight of its own, they look so serious on Sundays!

I decided the UK ornament had to be made at the same time as the Chrismons because they are so similar in material and appearance. And that was the height of UK fever at Crestwood. Joe B. Hall was a member and David Blondell was the team chaplain. We couldn't schedule a church meeting without first checking the UK schedule!

But I may have been wrong. Varying responses kept taking me back to the twinkle in Rev. McDonald's eye. I think he might suspect who first placed the ornament on the Crestwood tree, but he's not telling. His wife Julie told Roberta Buckley, who had become my fellow-sleuth, that it appeared during Bill's time in the pulpit. Regardless, it's been a wonderful chuckle every Christmas for decades for the choir.

I'm no Miss Marple, so I had to give up. Don't you think it is finally time for the mystery to be solved? I'm here and listening if anyone will share the details as to how and when the UK ornament was made and appeared.

As I've stumbled through Crestwood's stories and history, I realize it is fun to be part of a congregation that can both laugh and worship together. We have long been a congregation where members jump in to make ornaments, decorate the sanctuary, and care about our church. What a wonderful, worshipful place where there is something interesting around every corner.

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If there is some area of the church you would like to know more about, please share your ideas with me. Let's explore together. [Gaye Holman](#)



Crestwood Christian Church | 1882 Bellefonte Dr., Lexington, KY 40503

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